<u>Claims</u>

We claim:

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1. A computer-implemented method for use by a merchant in a virtual retail store in communicating a message to a customer who has selected multiple items for purchase, the method comprising:

establishing an online shopping session with the customer;

10   maintaining a list of the items that the customer has selected for purchase during the online shopping session;

providing information about the items in the list to an analytical program;

using the analytical program to identify at least one alternative item that the customer might want to buy;

15   preparing a message that includes information about the alternative item; and

before the online shopping session has ended, delivering the message to the customer.

2. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

20   obtaining data about previous purchases made by one or more customers of the merchant; and

providing this data to the analytical program for use in identifying at least one alternative item that the customer might want to buy.

25   3. The method of claim 2, where obtaining data about previous purchases includes obtaining data about one or more previous purchases made by the customer to whom the message is being delivered.

4. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

obtaining data about an inventory level of at least one item in the virtual retail store; and

providing this data to the analytical program for use in identifying at least one

5 alternative item that the customer might want to buy.

5. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

obtaining data about at least one of the following things: weather in the area in which the store is located; an upcoming holiday; fashion trends; a recipe; a shopping list

10 made by the customer; a wish list made by the customer; a wish list made by someone for whom the customer is shopping; and

providing this data to the analytical program for use in identifying at least one alternative item that the customer might want to buy.

15 6. The method of claim 1, where preparing the message includes generating an offer to purchase the alternative item at a discounted price.

7. The method of claim 6, further comprising:

obtaining data that indicates which items the merchant is willing to discount; and

20 providing this data to the analytical program for use in identifying at least one alternative item that the customer might want to buy.

8. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

obtaining data that indicates a customer-value score for the customer to whom the

25 message is being delivered; and

providing this data to the analytical program for use in identifying at least one alternative item that the customer might want to buy.

9. Computer program code, stored on a tangible storage medium, for use by a merchant in a virtual retail store in communicating a message to a customer who has selected multiple items for purchase, the program comprising executable instructions that, when executed by a computer, cause the computer to:

5   establish an online shopping session with the customer;

maintain a list of the items that the customer has selected for purchase during the online shopping session;

analyze the list to identify at least one alternative item that the customer might want to buy;

10   prepare a message that includes information about the alternative item; and

before the online shopping session has ended, deliver the message to the customer.

10. The method of claim 9, where the code also causes the computer to:

obtain data about previous purchases made by one or more customers of the

15   merchant; and

provide this data for use in identifying at least one alternative item that the customer might want to buy.

11. The method of claim 10, where, in obtaining data about previous purchases, the

20   computer obtains data about one or more previous purchases made by the customer to whom the message is being delivered.

12. The method of claim 9, where the code also causes the computer to:

obtain data about an inventory level of at least one item in the virtual retail store;

25   and

provide this data for use in identifying at least one alternative item that the customer might want to buy.

13. The method of claim 9, where the code also causes the computer to:

obtain data about at least one of the following things: weather in the area in which the store is located; an upcoming holiday; fashion trends; a recipe; a shopping list made by the customer; a wish list made by the customer; a wish list made by someone for whom the customer is shopping; and

provide this data for use in identifying at least one alternative item that the customer might want to buy.

14. The method of claim 9, where, in preparing the message, the program causes the computer to generate an offer to purchase the alternative item at a discounted price.

15. The method of claim 14, where the code also causes the computer to:

obtain data that indicates which items the merchant is willing to discount; and

provide this data for use in identifying at least one alternative item that the customer might want to buy.

16. The method of claim 9, where the code also causes the computer to:

obtain data that indicates a customer-value score for the customer to whom the message is being delivered; and

provide this data for use in identifying at least one alternative item that the customer might want to buy.

17. A computer system for use by a merchant in a virtual retail store in communicating a message to a customer who has selected multiple items for purchase, the system comprising:

at least one processor;

5   a network interface component configured to allow the computer to exchange information with the customer over a computer network; and

one or more data storage units configured to store one or more application programs and one or more analytical programs, where the application and analytical programs comprise executable instructions that, when executed by the processor, cause the

10   computer to:

establish an online shopping session with the customer;

maintain a list of the items that the customer has selected for purchase during the online shopping session;

analyze the list to identify at least one alternative item that the customer might

15   want to buy;

prepare a message that includes information about the alternative item; and

before the online shopping session has ended, deliver the message to the customer.

20   18. The system of claim 17, further comprising a database-management system configured to:

store data about previous purchases made by one or more customers of the merchant; and

when instructed to do so, retrieve this data for use in identifying at least one

25   alternative item that the customer might want to buy.

19. The system of claim 18, where the database-management system, in storing data about previous purchases, is configured to store data about one or more previous purchases made by the customer to whom the message is being delivered.

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20. The system of claim 18, where the database-management system is also configured to:

store data about an inventory level of at least one item in the virtual retail store; and

when instructed to do so, retrieve this data for use in identifying at least one

5   alternative item that the customer might want to buy.

21. The system of claim 18, where the database-management system is also configured to:

store data that indicates the items for which the merchant is willing to offer a price

10   discount; and

when instructed to do so, retrieve this data for use in identifying at least one alternative item that the customer might want to buy.

22. The system of claim 18, where the database-management system is also

15   configured to:

store data that indicates a customer-value score for the customer to whom the message is being delivered; and

when instructed to do so, retrieve this data for use in identifying at least one alternative item that the customer might want to buy.

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